Locke and the Issue over Innateness (Margaret Atherton)

Summary of the Argument

Priority of Locke’s Opinions
- Locke was an empiricist because of his rejection of innate ideas, not vice versa
- Locke’s rejection of innate ideas arises from his philosophy of mind
- Locke rejects two forms of innatism: naïve innatism, claiming it to be intelligible but false; and more sophisticated versions, claiming them to be either unintelligible or trivially true.

Locke on Belief
- Locke rejects the argument for innateness from universal harmony of belief. We’d have to rule out alternative means of achieving this harmony; but this task is hardly necessary as there is no such harmony in the first place.
- Locke won’t allow people to be said to believe things merely because they would assent to the proposition if it was presented to them.
- In Locke’s view, habitual knowledge, and all that we can be said to believe, are such as were once consciously perceived and are now in the memory.
- He considers it empty to suppose that someone has implicit knowledge of a self-evident proposition before they’ve considered it; they come to know these things on first consideration.

Locke on Ideas, Perceptions and Consciousness
- For Locke, an idea is only an idea when actually being perceived. However, the mind has the faculty to revive perceptions that are stored in memory. Until replayed, perceptions, as perceptions, are really nowhere.
- For Locke, mental things – such as ideas or propositions - are only really in the mind when we are conscious of them. Unconscious memories are only in the mind in the derivative sense of powers to produce conscious ideas.
- For Locke, an idea just is a way of perceiving. It makes no sense to talk of an unconscious idea.

Locke on Mental Faculties
- Locke is willing to posit, amongst numerous mental faculties, a faculty of memory as well as episodes of remembering.
- Locke distinguishes between the dull claim that we have faculties of one sort or another and the interesting claims of why we have them.
- Those who claim that innate ideas are present as dispositions are saying more than that human beings have capacities – they are saying that the innate ideas explain these capacities. It is this that Locke objects to; he rejects the proposal that we naturally assent to self-evident truths because we already know the underlying propositions.
- Locke doesn’t object to the idea that our mental states are determined by our inborn constitution. He believes that we are wired-up by nature to have simple ideas in the way we do.
- Locke denies that what is inborn is “in our minds” or is formed of ideas.
• He is agnostic as to what accounts for our mental capacities and believes that we are ignorant of the actual mechanism by which external events produce sensations in us.

Locke’s Positive Programme
• Locke doesn’t reject nativist claims because he has a positive programme in the form of a fully worked-out alternative, but because he thinks these claims unintelligible.
• He thinks he can explain a lot by reference to mental operations we are all aware of, but doesn’t claim to be able to explain all that a nativist claims to explain.
• Atherton says that, contrary to what is often said, Locke is not committed to the view that our complex ideas are formed from simples by a few principles of association.
• Consequently, it is a mistake to think that Locke rejects innate ideas because he has a system that shows we can do without them.

Locke versus Descartes

Descartes
• Descartes held that the only knowledge is certain knowledge and argued for innate ideas on the basis that, since what we learn from experience is at most probable, all we can know with certainty must be unlearned.
• Descartes also held that mental states are distinguishable from physical states because only mental states are transparent to their possessor, so that consciousness is the distinguishing characteristic of thought.
• However, Descartes is also committed, by grounding knowledge in innate ideas, to a belief inconsistent with this – of acknowledging a hidden structure of thought; of ideas we are not aware of.
• The reason for this is because Descartes wants both to hold that consciousness is the distinguishing feature of mentality and that whatever is responsible for thought is itself a kind of thought rather than, say, a physical process.

Locke
• Locke escapes from this dilemma by denying that we can have thoughts unawares and by adopting an agnostic rather than dualist position over what is responsible for our thoughts.
• Locke thought it was a matter for investigation what, if anything, we can know with certainty. He is opposed to the arguments that run from what knowledge we allegedly must have to what faculties we therefore must have to deliver it.
• Locke thinks the argument should run in reverse – going from what faculties we have to what knowledge we can obtain by their use.

Response to Issues Raised
• I’m happy with Atherton’s reconstruction of Locke’s arguments
• Locke’s view seems to be that ideas have to have been consciously entertained before they get into the memory. Innate ideas could, presumably, have come ready-planted into a memory supplied from birth, and be experienced for the first time when first recalled from the memory.
• Locke’s (and Descartes’s) rejection of unconscious mental events seems to be contrary to what we now know empirically about the human mind.
**Detailed Argument**

- Empiricism is often linked with the rejection of innate ideas; so much so that this is often taken to be its defining characteristic. All knowledge comes from experience. Locke, as a key figure in the development of empiricism, believed the mind to be a tabula rasa written on by experience and consequently, so the story goes, rejected innate ideas and principles. Atherton thinks this view has obscured the origins of Locke’s empiricism and that we need to be clearer about Locke’s actual arguments. She believes that the traditional view has the priority of Locke’s beliefs wrong, and that it was rather his views on mentality that drove his views on innateness which led to his empiricism.

- The presupposition of the *standard view*, that Locke’s views on innateness stem from his empiricism, is that empiricists consider the mind only to have simple combinatorial networks rather than richer structures. The mind is furnished with simple ideas which the mind associates into complexes. Since all our ideas are either simples or constructed from them, there is no reason to posit innate ideas. This understanding lays Locke open to the objection that the combinatorial principles must be innate. Consequently, empiricists like Locke are only committed to simpler rather than richer mental processes and not to rejecting innateness as such. Additionally, Locke is open to a yet-to-be-constructed counterexample of an idea that cannot be constructed from simples, the presumption being that the onus is on him to show the impossibility of such a counterexample as the only alternative.

- These arguments against Locke get the order of his ideas wrong. His arguments against innateness are independent of any metaphysically economical programme describing the construction of complex ideas from simples. Locke is instead concerned with the difficulties that beset systems such as Descartes’s that rely on innate ideas.

- Locke doesn’t begin the *Essay* by describing his views on the construction of complex ideas, but by a sustained attack on innateness. Book 1 has often been ignored by critics as attacking a straw man by assuming that knowledge is innate only if we are (ridiculously) born consciously assenting to it. Bona fide theories of innateness claim only that innate ideas or principles are tacitly present as dispositions or capacities. While Locke does reject this version as well, he’s not taken seriously as his own theories seem to presuppose such capacities. However, Locke’s arguments in Book 1 split into two kinds. Those against naïve innatism claim to show it to be intelligible but false; those against more sophisticated versions claim to show them to be either unintelligible or trivially true.

- Atherton now proceeds to Locke’s actual arguments which attack the view “commonly taken for granted” that there are certain practical and speculative principles that all people consent to, which shows them to be innate as it would otherwise be too much of a coincidence. Locke’s response is that to prove innateness we’d have to rule out alternative means of achieving universal harmony of belief, but that this task is hardly necessary as there is no such harmony in the first place. Locke considers that innate knowledge implies universal consent; in particular, calling something knowledge implies that it is known and consented to¹. Nativists are, maybe innocently, committed to believing

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¹ Recall the pre-Gettier view of knowledge being justified true belief.
the ridiculous claim that children are born perceiving and agreeing to the truth of such principles as “whatever is, is”.

- Locke’s argument above seems to depend on the implausible view that for someone to know something, the knowledge must be continuously conscious – indeed, Locke claims that it is unintelligible that something should be imprinted on the mind without the mind being aware of it.

- Some try to defend Locke against being supposed to believe that for something to be in the mind it has to be in the person’s consciousness, but only that it should be believed by that person. However, this doesn’t help given Locke’s views on what believing entails; which is that we have to have considered a proposition and not merely be disposed to act as if it were true. His argument that young children consent to “sweet is not bitter” but not to “it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be” is that the former proposition has occurred to them while the latter has not. He won’t allow people to be said to believe things they would assent to if the proposition was presented to them. He considers it empty to suppose that someone has implicit knowledge of a self-evident proposition before they’ve considered it; they come to know these things on first consideration, and thereafter don’t doubt them.

- However, Locke does not believe that people only believe those few things they are consciously aware of at a particular time. In Locke’s view, habitual knowledge, and all that we can be said to believe, are such as were once consciously perceived and are now in the memory. For Locke, an idea is only such when actually being perceived. However, the mind has the faculty to revive perceptions that are stored in memory. Until replayed, as perceptions they are really nowhere.

- Hence, for Locke, mental things – such as ideas or propositions - are only really in the mind when we are conscious of them. Unconscious memories are only in the mind in the derivative sense of powers to produce conscious ideas.

- Atherton gives a brief exposition of Locke’s notion of ideas. For Locke, an idea just is a way of perceiving. It makes no sense to talk of an unconscious idea. Ideas have specific content, so having an idea of water is different from that of H₂O or that of a colourless drinkable liquid; each of these ideas are a different form of awareness. The kind of ideas a mind can have are those it can be aware of. Having an idea of a particular content comes about by having awareness of that content, so it is, for Locke, nonsensical to say we can have ideas of things of which we have never been aware. Locke places the burden on the innatist to say in what sense innate ideas can belong to minds who are not having them.

- Locke is willing to posit, amongst numerous mental faculties, a faculty of memory as well as episodes of remembering. This is sometimes said to erode the difference between Locke and the nativists who have argued that innate ideas are no more than tendencies or dispositions (like veins in marble predisposing the statue to turn out in a particular way). However, Locke distinguishes between the dull claim that we have faculties of one sort or another and the interesting claims of why we have them. What are we claiming when we say that an idea is innate? If just that we recognise it as true on being presented with it, then this doesn’t distinguish innate ideas from all the other ideas we have understood and assented to, and the innatist

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2 Margaret Atherton doesn’t seem to have said, yet, that Locke’s view is that ideas have to have been consciously entertained before they get into the memory (assuming, of course, that this is Locke’s view). Innate ideas could, presumably, have come ready-planted into a memory supplied from birth, and be experienced for the first time when first recalled from the memory.
is agreeing with those who deny innate ideas, but just speaking “in an improper way”. Since no-one would deny that we can do what we end up doing, Locke cannot on this account be taken to support innatism.

• Those who claim that innate ideas are present as dispositions are saying more than that human beings have capacities – they are saying that the innate ideas explain these capacities. It is this that Locke objects to; he rejects the proposal that we naturally assent to self-evident truths because we already know the underlying propositions. According to Locke, ideas are acts of awareness, so cannot be used to explain anything unless we are aware of them. Locke isn’t complaining that it is wrong to say that human beings have natural tendencies – eg. to seek happiness and avoid misery – his complaint is that it is wrong to explain such tendencies in terms of principles and ideas unconsciously present in the mind. Words like “idea”, in Locke’s usage, make sense only at the conscious level.

• Locke doesn’t object to the idea that our mental states are determined by our inborn constitution. Indeed, he believes that we are wired-up by nature to have simple ideas in the way we do. This is what guarantees that the secondary qualities we perceive genuinely reflect the powers in bodies to produce them in us, and indeed the qualities that are truly in those bodies themselves. However, he denies that we have any innate knowledge of colours that explains how we perceive them; his view is that we are ignorant of the actual mechanism by which external events produce sensations in us.

• While Locke doesn’t object to talk of us having capacities dependent on our inborn constitution, he denies that what is inborn is “in our minds” or is formed of ideas. He is agnostic as to what accounts for our mental capacities.

• Atherton says that Locke is not committed to the view that our complex ideas are formed from simples by a few principles of association. While he introduced the phrase “association of ideas” into philosophy, this was as a pejorative term used to condemn prejudicial associations formed on the basis of custom. Locke’s theory of the relation between simple and complex ideas is difficult to understand, but includes the thought that at least discerning and abstracting, as well as combining, are required. However, he doesn’t reject nativist claims because he has a fully worked-out alternative, but because he thinks these claims unintelligible. He thinks he can explain a lot by reference to mental operations we are all aware of, but doesn’t claim to be able to explain all that a nativist claims to explain.

• It is Locke’s emphasis on the possible limitation of our knowledge that sets him apart from such philosophers as Descartes, who held that the only knowledge is certain knowledge. Descartes argued for innate ideas on the basis that, since what we learn from experience is at most probable, all we can know with certainty must be unlearned. Locke thought it was a matter for investigation what, if anything, we can know with certainty. He is opposed to the arguments that run from what knowledge we must have to what faculties we therefore must have to deliver it. He thinks the argument should run in reverse – going from what faculties we have to what knowledge we can obtain by their use. One thing Locke is convinced of is that one thing we cannot do is have innate knowledge, and his positive programme is willing to accept the consequence that there may be ideas we can’t have.

3 Note Atherton’s footnote on the difference between Locke and Hume, who is said to have held that while no ideas are innate, all impressions are innate since they are natural and not copied from anything else. For Hume, it is said, an idea is innate if it cannot be learned. What is he on about?
Consequently, it is a mistake to think that Locke rejects innate ideas because his positive programme implies we can do without them. Locke doesn’t claim that his system is as powerful as that claimed by the nativist. He rejects explanations in terms of innate ideas out of hand as incoherent because he takes it that mental states are conscious states and it is impossible to have mental states such as ideas or principles without being aware of them. Locke therefore thinks it is inappropriate to talk of ideational content as existing in unconscious form. The nativist needs to explain some way of having ideas or principles without being aware of them, but Locke thinks this impossible.

Descartes held that mental states are distinguishable from physical states because only mental states are transparent to their possessor, so that consciousness is the distinguishing characteristic of thought. However, Descartes is also committed, by grounding knowledge in innate ideas, to a belief inconsistent with this – of acknowledging a hidden structure of thought; of ideas we are not aware of. The reason for this is because Descartes wants both to hold that consciousness is the distinguishing feature of mentality and that whatever is responsible for thought is itself a kind of thought rather than, say, a physical process. Locke escapes from this dilemma by denying that we can have thoughts unawares and by adopting an agnostic rather than dualist position over what is responsible for our thoughts.

So, Locke rejects innate ideas not as a direct consequence of his empiricist programme, nor because of any account of constructing complex ideas from simples, nor on account of metaphysical economy. The latter might divide Hume and Kant, with Hume’s associative principles simpler than Kant’s categories, but Hume’s view isn’t Locke’s. Locke’s rejection of innateness theories such as Descartes’s is over whether it is legitimate to give an account of the hidden structure underlying thought which sees it as itself mental, as knowledge of ideas or principles. Locke’s empiricism – that our ideas derive from experience – follows from his rejection of innate ideas, which itself depends on his theory of the nature of the mental.

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4 Atherton quotes Margaret Wilson (Descartes, p. 164) as the source for this interpretation.